

Paul Brodowsky

## Amidst the Ground-elder

I've only ever seen my father cry once in my life. It was in a small wood, the countryside was hilly, beech trees, tall thujas, a nettle patch, the earth overgrown with ground-elder that had spread profusely in this well-fertilised soil, thin-leafed, light-green ground-elder, growing in the shade and covering everything like graveyard ivy. We wandered around this scrubland, my mother, my father and me, their youngest child, me always between them in my adolescent, twelve-year-old body, the three of us in a park-like hilly landscape on the edge of O., somewhere in the north east of Poland. At some point my father stopped, in the middle of a patch of ground-elder, he no longer knew where he was, he stopped and doubled over, this small, strong man, and gave out a snorting noise, a wheezing, a noise that at first I couldn't place, and then his breathing was accompanied by an almost childlike high-pitched tone, this tone, this snorting reminded me of his fits of pent-up anger, an anger that built up in the unread piles of *Heimatbriefe des Kreises T.*, "Land der dunklen Wälder", an anger that spilled out suddenly in crumpled but never torn newspapers, but which generally stayed locked inside his strong, tense body, my father, who folds the newspaper, the editorial, my father, who although he reads the Spiegel does not want to give it his support and who therefore always sells the magazine on to his colleague D. on Tuesdays, my father, who crumples up the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* with a mixture of disbelief and impatience, as if he wanted to change what was written there, to jumble up the letters, who folds the paper down to a sixteenth, a thirty-second of its size, who from where he is he lying

throws this pressed together newspaper on to the living room table, jumps up from the couch, and then paces vigorously up and down in the living room and in the dining room next door and at the same time shifts the furniture, the studded leather dining-room chairs, the three-piece suite, chair by chair, inch by inch, so that the marks left by the chairs are visible in the pile of the living-room carpet, the sleepless nights, my father, who tosses and turns in bed, at three, four o'clock at night, who falls asleep on the couch during the day with the newspaper over his face or chest, who wakes up the moment the radio is turned off, only then did I see the buckled old man, standing before me in the ground-elder, my rhythmically sobbing father, tears running down his cheeks and dripping from his trimmed grey beard down on to the profuse all-covering vegetation.

My father had had this beard cut before the trip, he had asked my mother on the morning of one of the last workdays before the holidays to cut his bristly grey hair the next day, before he drove to the Institute, generally just before being cut it was so long that it started to curve over his upper lip as if it had a will of its own, my father, who would put the soup bowl down and then wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, with a napkin, over his lips, to get the bits and pieces of the fish soup, the vegetable or pea soup out of his beard, rubbing small pieces of salmon or carrot into the fabric of the napkin, when he had his beard cut he would have a makeshift barber's apron hung over him, the same one that was hung over us children when we were subjected to the hair-cutting procedure we hated so much, or was it a large towel, in spring and summer my father would sit down on the kitchen chair naked above the waist, the beard hairs would descend onto his hairy unshorn chest, onto his mighty

belly, his thin legs. My mother would cut his beard and his hair or what had not yet fallen off my father's vigorous, well-formed skull, the two of them would talk to each other all the while in soft, almost tender tones, interrupted every now and then by the short, warning grunts my father gave out when his hair got caught in the scissors.

A few hours before we stopped in the ground-elder, the word *Achottachottachott* had taken on a new colour for me, since that day in the ground-elder it is no longer only connected with songs, "Land der duhunklen Wälder/ über weite Felder/ lichte Wu-hunder gehn". *Achottachott* was a word I knew from my father, for me the word had always had a homely sound to it, although my father only used it at special moments, never at the rare moments of real fear, *Achottachott* was no everyday word, it was always a word that evoked the homeland, something from earlier times, my father was a professor of Experimental Physics, he used to travel to China and America, he held slide talks, he would be picked up in a car, a car with a *chauffeur*, as he liked to emphasise, to go and speak about Japan, *a Far East Society in Upheaval* in Plön or Preetz at scientific associations or was it evening classes or Rotary Clubs or some other educational institutes, before such an audience a word like *Achottachott* would never have passed his lips. At most he would use this word in the family circle, alongside words like *Striezel* for a plaited bun or *Zagel* for a tail, would you like *Zagelchen*, asks my father, we are sitting at the dining table, we're having trout, swallowing dry bread to stop the bones getting stuck in our throats, I'd prefer not to have any trout, my grandmother, says my father, always gave me *Zagelchen*, there are no bones, he says and pushes the pieces of flesh he has carefully picked from the fish's

tail on to my plate. In our family *Achottachott*, *Striezel* and *Zagel* led a shadow existence, ground-elder ran riot at the shaded end of our garden, spreading through the hedge into the neatly arranged beds, emerging from the small strip of trees that separated the gardens belonging to the terraced houses from the ring road, my mother spent hours digging up the tangled roots and tipping bucket-loads of them back over the hedge, on the far corner of the newspaper table that was always overflowing with *Heimatbriefe des Kreises T.*, in the bookcase stood two thick illustrated books that had been published in the nineties with historic photographs of O., prominent on the spine of these illustrated books was the German name T., the name this place gave itself shortly before 1933, previously it had been called M., which the nationalistically minded local population felt sounded too Polish, so they gave first the county town, and then in 1933 also the district, the artificial name T., the books consisted mainly of black-and-white photographs of T. or M. or O., as both district and town have been called since 1945, almost all the pictures had been taken before 1945 and showed a picturesque small town on a lake, enclosed was the facsimile of an old town map.

On the morning of the same day, in other words before we started wandering around what had once been O.'s cemetery, my father had explained something he had never talked about before, the three of us went to visit the place where, according to my father's information, his parents' house, their butcher's shop had stood, which as a twelve-yearold I knew from his stories, the black pudding, the liver sausage, now there was a kind of gap between the buildings, a sandy lot between houses where a few cars had been parked, behind that was a stream,

in my memory at the far end of the gap there are some green reeds. I also remember the long stretched-out lake, and an *Abbau*, the name my parents' dialect gave to individual farms or small collections of farm houses, an *Abbau*, which formerly had had its own village name, something that ended in -itten or -itzko, since then the place has disappeared off the map, for hours we looked for this *Abbau* to the east of O., on the other side of the lake, eventually on a piece of fallow ground we found a cluster of apple trees overgrown with lichen, some hand-hewn foundation stones, still lying in rectangles, the odd tile, or was that the day I refused to come along, remaining behind in the house where we were staying, and it was just that my parents described the search in a very lively way.

Not far from the gap between the houses, the place where my father had lived as a small boy, in the morning we walked over the small town's large square, the sun was shining, my father pointed to a house with some steps at the front leading to a raised ground floor and recounted an episode he had witnessed as a six-year-old boy, my father had never before spoken about it and later I never heard anything about this episode again, much unlike certain other stories about his early sense of achievement, which he told over and over again, the lung of a bird, air bags on the sides. There at the front, said my father, as we walked over O.'s enormous market square, always keeping an eye out for traces, for remembered buildings, old lettering on houses, over there in that house there was a small general store, or some other kind of shop, and once as a young boy, half as old as you are now, he said to me, two uniformed men led away a shop-keeper. I can remember how the shop-keeper held

his cheek, my father said. Held his cheek and said Achottachottachott, as he was being marched off, according to my father. I cannot remember whether my father said what time of day it was when he had observed this, but when I imagine this scene, or remember how I imagined this event as a twelve-year-old, it is bright daylight, or it is early evening, “Land der dunklen Wälder/ und kristallinen Seen”, we used to sing at big family occasions, baptisms, confirmations, silver-wedding anniversaries, sitting around the dinner table with the garden table as an extension, the children at a side table, actually our living-room table covered with white linen, the illustrated books showing the bathing place, frontal views of all the buildings around O.’s market square, black-and-white photos of small town shops and stores.

Only a few hours later we walked over O.’s abandoned hilly cemetery overgrown with ground-elder, my mother and I either side of the weeping man holding him up, we had found a kind of clearing, stone crosses, instead of ground-elder there was grey-green grass swaying in the shade, a kind of heroes’ cemetery from the first world war, my mother and me in the main railway station in Kiel, in the concourse turned rusty black by fumes from the diesel locomotives and probably also by smoke from the earlier steam locomotives, she presses a ten-pfennig coin into my hand and tells me to put the coin into the slit of a lead-sealed tin can which a man dressed in grey clattered at regular intervals and then shook once with a jerk, the three of us stumbled up the hill, making our way through beech trunks and unkempt thujas, over gravestone kerbs, which appeared to me strangely small, made of stone, overgrown with nettles and bramble tendrils, until my father eventually stopped, this is where it might have

been, the grave of his father, a butcher who died of blood poisoning following an accident at work shortly before the war, or on the eve of the war, as my father used to say, and me sitting there in the shop window, said my father, holding a black pudding in one hand, a liver sausage in the other, I was an attraction, me a small, sturdy boy in the butcher's window, people came because of me, to look at me in the window, now my father had stopped, my mother took a stick, or she had a newspaper with her which she had rolled up specially, at any rate she wiped clean a surface about the size of a grave, my father began to cry, under the bent stalks of the ground-elder I could recognise the gravestone kerbs, the stalks lay across the cleared surface, my father cried for the first time in his life, or to be more precise, he made a noise I did not immediately recognise as crying, a rapid, high-pitched sound, like stifled wheezing, which I have never heard before, either from him or from anyone else.